

# Students: The Gathering

By Henri Tetrault



Every afternoon a cluster of students crowds around two small folding tables at Out of Time Comics, involved in a Penn tradition of lightning wit and sophisticated skill. These are not young, tweed-clad chaps engaging in a quiet game of chess, however. They are playing a new card game with an international following invented by a former Penn mathematics professor.

"MAGIC: The Gathering," which combines role playing with card trading, has sold more than 2 billion cards world wide since it was created in 1993 by Richard Garfield, a former University of Pennsylvania mathematics professor.



***Hundreds of MAGIC cards exist, some quite rare, and players trade them to strengthen their decks.***

Garfield created MAGIC in 1993 for Wizards of the Coast (W.O.T.C.), a small, young Seattle company, which specializes in role-playing games. Garfield, here at Penn during that time, invented the concept and did most of the research and development of MAGIC with the help of a group of Penn students. Dubbed by the Seattle folks as the "East Coasters," they acted as play testers, and later many of them, including Garfield, moved to Seattle to continue their gaming careers.

MAGIC was greeted by instant worldwide success, elevating W.O.T.C. to a force to be reckoned within the gaming business. Founded in 1990, W.O.T.C. since then has established international offices in the United Kingdom and Belgium and has grown to

more than 300 employees. MAGIC, its most successful product at \$9 dollars a pack, has brought in a substantial amount of revenue.

Part of that revenue comes from players at Penn. Every afternoon a number of students make their way from their last class to the comic-book store at Walnut near 38th Street. When the MAGIC players enter, foldable chairs and tables are pulled from the corner, long boxes of MAGIC cards are pulled from backpacks, cards are traded and the games begin. Someone takes orders for a snack run — including Gatorades, and bottled water — as these athletes of the mind work up an appetite. Some 30 students filter in and out of the busy comic store every week.

One busy afternoon, none of these steeped-in-strategy players was willing to reveal his name.

Some of the players said they have been playing since the game appeared on the market in 1993; some just picked up the game a few weeks ago. One young man, also travel-

The game is played with two or more "wizards," each armed with a deck of cards. The wizards duel for control of a magical plane. The tools of competition include evil spells, fantastic creatures, spiritual levels and enchanted lands — all at power levels designated by the cards. The cards themselves are bought, traded and collected much like baseball cards, allowing a player to create unique decks with different themes and strategies.

MAGIC uses hundreds of cards, each one a small work of art because of the intricate, comic-book-like graphics printed on the top half of the card. Printed below the graphics are the rules pertaining to that particular card, and numbers representing its powers in different situations.

MAGIC is a complex yet simply organized game that can be picked up by beginners within half an hour. But the strategic

planning takes practice and skill, a quality that attracts strategy-game masters.

What makes the game most exciting is that no two duels are the same due to the immense numbers of cards, the ability to create a deck or pick one randomly, and the opportunity to play the game in different ways, said Out of Time's assistant manager and avid MAGIC player, D.J. He preferred to be identified only by his initials and was the only player in the shy group who was bold enough to speak about the game.

The meeting in the comic store is just one of many in the area where MAGIC fans meet to test their decks

and have a good time. Pick-up games are common at CHATS on Thursday afternoons, and at Out of Time's second location on 19th Street weekend afternoons. The 19th Street store hosted a tournament Sunday.

The players welcome newcomers and a simplified version of MAGIC called PORTAL makes learning the game easier for beginners.



***MAGIC players gather at Out of Time Comics for afternoon pick-up games.***

ing incognito, said he is semi-pro and competes in international tournaments that have prizes of up to \$20,000. W.O.T.C. sponsors the tournaments.

The company organized a world-wide pro tour in 1996 that popularized the game to a wider audience. The tournaments have elevated the cerebral MAGIC to the kind of competitive sport that requires practice.